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Culture of nursing school: students' perceptions

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Abstract

School culture is a powerful structure that facilitates understanding the behaviors of the participants through their school life. A positive and effective school culture brought about numerous benefits such as improving the commitment to the school, creating trust and preventing conflicts. In this study, perceptions of school culture among students enrolled in schools of nursing were investigated. The study is a descriptive one, which was performed with the participation of 625 students enrolled in four schools that offer nursing education. A "personal information form" and a "school culture scale" were used for data collection. The findings revealed that instructor-student relations subcategory of the scale ($X=2.04$) was the most positively perceived cultural characteristic for the students. It was also observed that student perception differ with respect to schools ($p<.05$) and there was a positive correlation between students' satisfaction about their schools and their perception of school culture. The study sets forth that students' perception of school culture positively contributes to their satisfaction with the school; therefore nursing students' perception of school culture should be improved. In future studies, the factors that influence nursing students' perception of school culture should be a more detailed examination.

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Introduction

School culture is one of the most complex and important concepts in education. School culture is a powerful structure that facilitates understanding the behaviors of the participants through their school life (Stoll, 1998). In recent years, the recognition of a strong school culture as one of the most important factors in enhancing schools' effectiveness and success has further increased the interest in this issue. (Dumay, 2009; Ozdemir, 2006). School culture is defined as the basic assumptions, norms, values and artifacts that are shared by school members, which

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influence their functioning at school (Engels et al., 2008). School culture is defined, in a different way, as the set of rules, norms, beliefs, traditions and values, which accumulated throughout the history of the school and are shared by all individuals at school; which constitute the identity of the school, influence the functioning of school members at school; and which define the social image of the school (Hoy, 1990; Maslowski, 2001; Stoll, 1998).

The values, attitudes, beliefs and practices present within an organization are widely shared and accepted in organizations with strong cultures (Erdem & Isbası 2001; Pratt et al., 1999; Robbins, 1993). Strong school culture emerges when managers, teachers and students unite around common values, norms, beliefs and practices. It was reported that, in schools with strong cultures, the academic staff felt better and more motivated, individuals were open to changes and innovation, and feelings of self-confidence, sharing, and appreciation were developed among members (Ozdemir, 2006; Terzi, 2007). In addition, it was emphasized that there was a work environment based on mutual trust and cooperation in which moral values and responsibilities were given priority, professional passion and excitement were promoted, sense of quality has become a tradition, and an intimate atmosphere was created (Ozdemir, 2006; Terzi, 2007; Staber, 2003). Research also indicates that academic achievements of students who experienced such a positive and socially-developed atmosphere were high, and a school with a strong culture positively influenced students' academic achievements (Dumay, 2009). Besides, it was emphasized that a positive and effective school culture brought about numerous benefits such as improving the commitment to the school, creating trust in the school and its administration, preventing conflicts, and increasing school's overall success, motivation and efficiency by shaping the behaviors and expectations of instructors and students (Erdem & Isbası, 2001; Terzi, 2007).

Investigations on school culture provide valuable data about how the existing practices at the school should be improved (Erdem & Isbası, 2001). One method of investigating the school culture is to examine the opinions of managers, instructors and students, who take part in the formation of this culture and who are also influenced by this culture (Kantek, 2005). It is indicated that the most effective tool of promotion in increasing the school's publicity and attractiveness, and thus ensuring its success and development is the evaluative discussions that students conduct with other students and other people around them (Yelkikalan et al., 2006). Schools should be aware of their cultures in order to advertise themselves to students, attract students, and survive in the competitive environment (Yelkikalan et al., 2006). Students' opinions on school culture significantly contribute to the endeavors of increasing quality and efficiency in education, improving educational processes, and enhancing the effectiveness of the basic educational functions of schools (Erdem & Isbası, 2001; Stoll, 1998; Wren, 1999). Therefore, in order the schools to maintain their function, they should be aware of their own culture and how it is perceived (Yelkikalan et al., 2006).

In the literature it was emphasized that research had been conducted on school culture in higher education institutions from different disciplines, and there was not a strong school culture in these schools but it should be improved (Argon & Kösterelioğlu, 2009; Erdem & Isbası, 2001; Yelkikalan et al., 2006; Yıldız & Bakır, 2006; Yılmaz & Oğuz, 2005). However, there is not sufficient information about the school cultures of Nursing Schools in Turkey. Kantek and Baykal (2009) investigated the Nursing Schools' culture with respect to their academic staff and concluded that the strongest cultural feature in these schools was the "student-oriented education", and also the culture of nursing schools should be strengthened. In addition to this, in both national and international literature, any information on how student nurses perceived their schools' culture could not be found.

Due to all these reasons, this study aims at investigating the cultures of institutions which provide Nursing education in Turkey from with regard to students' opinions. The data to be obtained from the data are thought to contribute in improving student-instructor relations, creating transformation strategies for nursing schools, decreasing the school leave rates and establishing a positive school environment.

Methods

Participants

The research was conducted in four schools that offer nursing education in two different cities in Turkey. Two of the schools were High School of Nursing (Schools A and C) and two of them are High School of Health (schools B and D). One of the nursing schools was in a state university, the other one was in a private university. Both High Schools of Health were in state universities. All 2nd-, 3rd- and 4th-year students enrolled in these schools were included in the scope of the research. First-year students were not included since it was thought that they were in the process of orientation and that they did not have sufficient knowledge about their schools' culture.

The data were gathered from 625 nursing students who attended school during the period in which the research was conducted. All participants were female students and the average age was 21.55 ± 1.58 (min: 18, max: 34),

26.9% of the participant students were 2nd-grade, 32.6% were 3rd-grade, and 40.5% were 4th-grade students. The minimum duration spent for education was two years while the maximum was seven years. Whereas 10.9% of them were graduates of vocational high school of health, 17.8% of them are currently employed. Of the working students, 75.7% were working in a nursing-related job and 53.6% of them were working in other part-time jobs. 7.4% of the participants reported that they were highly satisfied with their schools, 41.3% were satisfied, 42.1% were partly satisfied, and 9.3% were unsatisfied with their schools.

Instruments

A Personal Information Form and a School Culture Scale were used in the study as the data collection tools. The personal information form, developed by the researchers, includes six questions addressing students' ages, grade levels, durations of their study, their employment statuses, characteristics of their jobs and to what extent they are satisfied with their schools. School culture scale, on the other hand, was developed by Kanteke, Baykal, and Altuntaş (2008) in order to determine nursing students' perception of school culture in terms of organization culture, and its validity-reliability was tested. In the validity-reliability study, the Cronbach's alpha value for the whole scale was found .93, and the Cronbach's alpha values of the sub-categories were found between .69 - .89. Item-total score correlations of the scale, which consists of 50 items, are between .26 - .65. The scale, which has eight sub-categories ("school administrators-student relations", "commitment to the school", "instructor-student relations", "reward system/openness to change", "school's structure and functioning", "relations between instructors", "relations between students" and "support"), is graded at four stages (agree -3, somewhat agree-2, disagree-1, no idea-0). The scale's minimum point is 1, maximum point is 3 and mean point is 2. The increase in the scale's mean point indicates that the student perceives the school culture positively.

Ethical Dimension

Before proceeding to the data collection stage, ethics committee approval was obtained and official permissions were received from the administrators of the relevant institutions. The researchers informed students in the classroom about the research, and the research data were collected after obtaining verbal consents of those students who were willing to participate in the study.

Data Collection

The researchers defined, through interviews with the institutions over the telephone, the classes when and where the students would be available for the research and went to the schools, after taking permissions of the instructors. The data collection tools were distributed in the classroom to the students and collected back after the students filled out them. 700 students were given the data collection tools, and 691 (98,7%) of them returned. Of these questionnaires, 66 were excluded from the analysis since they lacked certain information and, thus, statistical analyses were conducted using the data from 625 individuals.

Analysis

In the reliability analysis of the School Culture Scale the Cronbach alpha coefficient was used. For determining the individual features of students and their perception about school culture frequency, percentage distribution and arithmetic mean were used. ANOVA was used to compare the sub-category scores of the scale. Spearman correlation analysis was used to investigate the relationship between the school culture scale and the satisfaction from the school. The collected data were analyzed in computer environment by running frequency and percentage distribution, arithmetic mean and ANOVA tests through SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) 15.0 software.

Results

As seen in Table 1, students' perception of the sub-categories of the school culture scale ranged from more positive to more negative as follows: instructor-student relations, structure/functioning, relations between instructors, commitment, relations between students, support, relations between school administrators and students, reward/openness to change. While the sub-category with the highest score is "instructor-student relations" (M=2.04, SD=.48) the sub-category with the lowest score is "reward/openness to change" (M=1.65, SD=.64).

Table 1. Mean scores of the students' school culture scale (n=625)

School culture scale sub-categories	M	SD	Min	Max
Relations between school administrators and students	1.69	.63	.00	3.00
Commitment	1.88	.61	.00	3.00
Instructor-student relations	2.04	.48	.63	3.00
Reward/Openness to change	1.65	.64	.00	3.00
Structure/Functioning	2.01	.49	.20	3.00
Relations between instructors	1.91	.66	.00	3.00
Relations between students	1.87	.52	.00	3.00
Support	1.81	.55	.25	3.00

When the school culture scale mean scores of the four nursing schools are compared (Table 2) it is seen that the highest mean score at D (X=2.07) and B (X= 2.11) belongs to the sub-category of “instructor-student relations”, and at A (X=2.03) and C (X=2.26) to the sub-category of “structure/functioning”. The sub-category of “relations between school administrators and students” had the lowest mean score at B (X=1.48); and the sub-category of “reward/openness to change” had the lowest mean score at D (X=1.66), A (X= 1.65) and C (X=1.72).

Table 2. Comparison of mean scores of the school culture scale's sub-categories (n=625)

School culture scale sub-categories	Schools								F	p
	A (n=177)		B (n=148)		C (n=53)		D (n=247)			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Relations between school administrators and students	1.77	.610	1.48	.588	1.83	.513	1.72	.678	7.326	.000*
Commitment	1.81	.618	1.76	.602	1.96	.600	1.99	.614	5.510	.001*
Instructor-student relations	1.99	.446	2.11	.516	1.86	.564	2.07	.462	4.647	.003*
Reward/Openness to change	1.65	.661	1.61	.590	1.72	.632	1.66	.663	.445	.721
Structure/Functioning	2.03	.495	1.99	.480	2.26	.381	1.96	.513	5.848	.001*
Relations between instructors	1.90	.699	1.97	.644	1.89	.645	1.88	.658	.587	.623
Relations between students	1.70	.448	1.95	.514	1.98	.658	1.93	.528	9.470	.000*
Support	1.77	.527	1.79	.557	1.84	.553	1.86	.574	1.095	.350

*p<0.05

When ANOVA was performed in order to compare the schools' scores of school culture categories; statistically significant differences were found between the schools' mean scores of sub-categories of “relations between school administrators and students” (p=.000), “commitment” (p=.001), “instructor-student relations” (p=.003), “structure/functioning” (p=.001) and “relations between students” (p=.000), at a significance level of 0.05. On the other hand, it was observed that no statistically significant differences exist between the schools' mean scores of sub-categories of “reward/openness to change”, “relations between instructors” and “support”.

In statistical comparisons, made with independent variables like students' ages, grade levels and satisfaction levels with the school, in order to examine the factors that influence students' school culture scale sub-category mean scores; a significant correlation was found only between students' satisfaction levels with their schools and their mean scores of school culture scale sub-categories.

After the correlation analysis of students' school culture scale mean scores and their satisfaction levels with their schools; significant positive correlation was found in the sub-dimensions of relations between school administrators and students (r= .329), commitment (r= .551), instructor-student relations (r= .392), reward-openness to change (r= .209), structure-functioning (r= .322), relations between instructors (r= .286), relations between students (r= .125) and support (r= .271) (Table 3).

Table 3. The relationship between the mean scores of school culture scale sub-categories and satisfaction with school (n=625)

School culture scale sub-categories	Satisfaction level with the school	
	r	p
Relations between school administrators and students	.329*	.000
Commitment	.551*	.000
Instructor-student relations	.392*	.000
Reward/Openness to change	.209*	.000
Structure/Functioning	.322*	.000
Relations between instructors	.286*	.000
Relations between students	.125*	.002
Support	.271*	.000

* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Discussion

The research findings demonstrate that the sub-category of instructor-student relations is the cultural characteristic that is perceived in the most positive manner by students. Similarly, in the study carried out by Kantek and Baykal (2009) to examine nursing schools' cultures from the instructors' perspectives, "student-orientedness" was found to be the strongest cultural characteristic perceived by instructors. Instructor-student relation is a fundamental relationship that forms the core of education. Outcomes of this relationship are of great importance since they directly influence student outputs like student achievement and satisfaction, and willingness to stay at the school (Ang, 2005; Frymier & Houser, 2000; Gillespie, 2004; Glossop, 2001; Glossop, 2002). Through student interaction, instructors not only contribute to students' professional development but also convey the cultural values, norms and practices of the school to students. Therefore, the finding of our study that instructor-student relations are perceived positively by students could be interpreted as a positive finding for nursing schools as it is likely to positively contribute to student outputs and to the creation of a strong school culture.

Another important finding of the study is that participant students' mean scores of school culture scale sub-categories are generally distributed around median scores. This finding can be interpreted in a way that students' perception of school culture is not clear yet. It is observed that other studies on nursing schools' cultures yielded similar results. In Hawks (1999) conducted in nine nursing colleges, it was found that nursing schools do not have strong cultures. Besides, Kantek and Baykal (2009) argued that there is not a total consensus among instructors in nursing schools about the common values, norms, beliefs and practices.

Studies conducted on school culture in different fields of university education suggest similar results. For instance, Bikmoradi et al. (2009) conducted in an Iranian Medical School and Ozer et al. (2008) in a Turkish Medical School argue that these schools' cultures are weak. In three different studies carried out in three different schools of physical training and sports in Turkey, it was concluded that these schools do not have strong organizational cultures (Bilir et al., 2003; Cimen, 2001; Yıldız & Bakır 2006). In a similar fashion, Erdem and Isbası (2001) examined the perceptions of organizational culture amongst the students of Faculties of Economics and Administrative Sciences, and concluded that these schools do not have strong cultures.

The findings of this study that nursing students' perception of school culture is low can be interpreted as an unsurprising situation for university education environments. However, it should be noted that these findings point to certain potential risks. It is suggested in the literature, that there is a direct correlation between an organization's performance and the strength of its culture; that is, especially those organizations that have strong cultures display better performances than others. Organization members in strong cultures internalize the cultural values through processes like teaching, learning, facilitating and sharing. This way, improvements are observed in members' motivations, commitments and performances, and decreases are seen in the rates of leaving the organization (Erdem & Isbası, 2001; Maslowski, 2001; Robbins, 1993; Sisman, 2002). In weak cultures, on the other hand, the case is the exact opposite. It could be argued that the finding of our study that students do not perceive school administrators, relations between themselves, rewards for their achievements, the value given to students and the school's image in

positive manners has a significant impact on reaching to this result. It could be suggested that school administrators' efforts to alleviate these problems would contribute to the formation of strong school cultures.

When students' perceptions of their schools' cultures are compared, it was found that there were similar perceptions and no statistically significant differences in sub-categories of reward/change, relations between instructors and support, whereas it was found that there were statistically highly significant perception differences in sub-categories of student-instructor relations, relations between school administrators and students, relations between instructors, relations between students, commitment and structure/functioning. Various studies (Erdem & Isbası, 2001; Terzi, 2007; Oğuz, 2005) similarly reported that there were perception differences between schools and departments. Given the fact that culture of an organization is unique to that organization (Stoll, 1988; Sisman, 2002), it could be suggested that students' perceptions of school culture are expected to differ in certain ways.

When the relation between the sub-category scores of the school culture scale and the satisfaction from school was examined, a positive correlation between these variables was found. Student satisfaction means to what extent students' expectations and necessities regarding the school and educational environment are met, and it contributes to students' intellectual and social effective development and change (Liegler, 1997). Many authors have suggested that the organizational culture has an impact on students' learning and satisfaction (Orucu & Ayhan, 2001; Pratt et al., 1999; Sisman, 2002). Findings of this study support this idea. It could be argued that a positive correlation between a student's satisfaction with his/her school and the perceived school culture is a significant clue about the practices of school administration and instructors. School administrators and instructors can improve students' positive perceptions of school culture further by increasing their satisfaction levels.

Limitations

The research was carried out in a limited number of schools and the findings obtained regarding school culture are restricted to the perceptions of the participants who were present on the date when the study was conducted. Therefore, these findings cannot be generalized to all schools of nursing. Nursing schools' cultures are bounded to the perceptions of students attending these schools. It should be noted that perceptions of other workers in these schools might be different.

Conclusion

In this study, perceptions of school culture among nursing students enrolled in schools of nursing in Turkey were investigated. It was observed, after the study, that there is a need to positively improve students' perceptions of school culture. Findings of this research were shared with the schools of nursing that constituted the sample and, thus, important data were provided for improvement steps to be taken in these institutions. Determining students' expectations regarding the school and education, such as focusing more on rewarding at schools, ensuring students' participation in educational decision-making processes and increasing students' participation in social activities, will significantly contribute to studies aiming at improving students' perceptions. It could be stated that a more detailed examination of the factors that influence students' perceptions of school culture and examination of perceptions not only of students but also of other workers at the school in future studies will provide more beneficial data for the efforts to improve school culture.

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